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12 May 1972

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Some Thoughts on the Present Crisis

It is risky business, in a period of intensive private diplomacy, to try to analyse Soviet behavior from public statements and "the logic of the situation." Nevertheless, here are a few propositions.

I. The Soviets calculate that the May summit will not take place.

A. They believe that the US President is unwilling to make the visit while the non-Communist position in South Vietnam is shaky and under heavy attack.

B. They are themselves unwilling to make the only move which might offset this US reluctance, i.e., pressure on North Vietnam so serious as to threaten an open break.

II. This being the case, they prefer that the summit be postponed rather than cancelled, and in a regretful rather than hostile fashion.

A. This would do the least damage to the interests which they had hoped to advance at the meeting and which they will still wish to pursue at a later date.

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B. It would also do the least damage to their European policy, which is separate from, but influenced by the course of, US-Soviet relations.

1. In this respect, the hiatus in Bundestag action on the Soviet-FRG treaty is a strong argument for refraining from retaliation against the US for its actions in North Vietnam.

III. These factors explain why, contrary to the expectations of many of us, the USSR did not initially react by withdrawing its invitation to the President.

IV. Events of this magnitude, coming to climax simultaneously, are almost certain to cause reverberations within the collective leadership.

A. Brezhnev, personally identified with the innovations in policy toward the US and West Germany, is likely to be in trouble.

B. It is in his interest to salvage as much as possible via a ratification of the German-Soviet treaty and a summit postponement arranged and announced with a minimum of rancor.

C. But if events move against him--a Bundestag vote against the treaty, or further US escalation in Vietnam (or, worst of all, both)--his instinct for self-preservation could lead him to swing over and try to put himself at the head of the opposing tendency in Soviet policy.

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v. While waiting on these contingencies, the USSR will try to keep things on an even keel.

A. The 11 May statement sets a viable line for this period--condemnation of the US action, but without interpreting it as a challenge to the USSR; pro forma reiteration of support for Hanoi; silence on the summit.

B. The corresponding decisions on concrete actions would be:

1. No challenge to the minefields.
2. Only formal protests of damage to Soviet ships [redacted]
3. No demonstrative surge in military aid to the DRV.
4. No major public statements unless new events require them.
5. Lots of private diplomacy with the US.

VI. The Soviets hope that, if there is to be no May summit, they will not have to be the ones to break it off.

A. Their first choice would be an agreed postponement.

B. Second choice is a US postponement.

C. Third is Soviet withdrawal of the invitation.

1. Brezhnev would feel forced to this if the US escalated further but still proceeded openly down the summit track.

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2. He would be under pressure to do it in a harsh way that would usher in a cold period in Soviet-US relations, at least until after November.

VII. The North Vietnamese would like to see the last of these outcomes materialize.

A. They do not like the mining or the attacks on the rail lines.

B. Nor are they happy with the way in which their allies are wavering.

C. But they do not feel themselves defeated, and their whole history suggests that they will react by increasing their battlefield pressures, hoping

1. to win as big a victory as possible,
2. to abort the summit, and
3. to force their allies to recommit themselves to the support of Hanoi.

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